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Charles W. Ryan

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## Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

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### Abstract

Jeremiah Sharpe listened to the revelers in the street below, hunched himself against the nagging chill, and listened with grudging envy to the hoots and laughter muted by the dusty, rain-streaked window glass.

### Additional Keywords

Fiction; Janus Winked; Charles W. Ryan

# JANUS WINKED

by Charles W. Ryan

Jeremiah Sharpe listened to the revelers in the street below, hunched himself against the nagging chill, and listened with grudging envy to the hoots and laughter muted by the dusty, rain-streaked window glass. He briefly considered the long, shuffling trip to the bathroom for the Extra Strength Tylenol and opted instead for the dull ache in his finger joints. He would probably find an empty bottle at the end of his trek, or a capsule laced with cyanide. Maybe he would try a copper bracelet. People swore it helped the arthritis.

Someone was prematurely singing "Auld Lang Syne," and he imagined himself in the midst of the gaily raucous crowd now celebrating the brief reign of Janus.

*Now, why would I think of Janus?* Sharp thought. The Roman two-faced god that looked to the past and to the future. *Did you ever actually do anything, Janus?* he thought in idle amusement. *If you did, its news to me.*

Almost midnight. Midnight, when the frenzy five stories below his drab apartment would peak in tumultuous celebration of a new beginning.

There would be shouts of "Happy New Year" even to strangers. Handshakes and kisses, confetti, champagne, and laughter. And also -- in this age -- brief, impulsive lovemaking in dark corners removed from the eddies and swirls of innocent merrymaking.

But not all innocence. Coke and angel dust, horse and crystal -- sniffed, injected, and ingested. Bricks crashing through plate-glass windows, punks in garish rebellion, bikers in leather and chains, youthful confrontations in worship of *machismo*, and muggers plying their trade.

And the older ones, braving the crowds and cacophony, remembering another day.

Jeremiah Sharpe remembered and allowed himself a mite of self-pity for the departed years. He twisted his creaking frame about for a better position in the ancient, overstuffed chair and surveyed the too-familiar landmarks of his domain. He found the bookcase and stared with rheumy eyes at the loving cup, sighed as he recalled that bright day at the Franklin County Track Meet where young Jerry Sharpe had been the hero of Bratton High with his easy victory in the hundred-yard dash. He could have been state champion, they said, but he had not gone for it. The gold, real at least for a few microns down, was dull now, but arthritis was hell on polishing. Forty-five years ago. No, forty-seven. Sad, he

thought, that the best he could do in almost half a century was a trophy in a county track meet. After that, his life had gone downhill. Glowing promise unfulfilled. The story of his life.

Sharpe's gaze fell on the painting, the brush strokes strangely luminous. Why had the colors not faded as had the wallpaper and the carpet? The picture was original. No one would make a copy of such a work. But it had intrigued him when he moved into the apartment twenty years before, and it fascinated him still.

The painting was nothing more than a badly drawn building, some trees, a road, and some mountains in the distance. The building looked as if it had been intended as a church, but it held a singularly unchurchlike quality. The structure was hideous, but the trees were -- alive. At times he could have sworn he saw the branches move in some random gust of wind. A trick of failing vision. A dusty road ran in front of the church (*was it a church?*) and disappeared through a group of trees.

Sharpe studied the painting now as he had done so many times before, unconsciously seeking the key to its enchantment. The large elm at the left for a moment seemed to quiver as if in a passing breeze. He blinked and stared harder. The thin formation of clouds appeared to shift a little. His body seemed weightless, of no substance. He was vaguely aware of a knock on his door, but the painting held him entranced.

Sharpe felt a startling sensation, the sudden jolt to wakefulness one sometimes experienced on the edge of sleep.

He was standing in a dirt road. Looking about in confusion, he saw the ugly building that might have been a church. And there, too, the elms swaying gently in the breeze. A cool breeze, welcome in the summer heat, that touched his face even as it caressed the trees.

A dream, he thought, but his instinct said no. Too real. But it had to be a dream. How could it be reality? No matter, he thought. Such a beautiful summer day was to be enjoyed without question.

He looked toward the place where the road led past the church and through the trees. What lay beyond? He began to walk that way.

As he approached the building, he saw that it was indeed a church. But close inspection did not relieve its ugliness. He shuddered and passed it by.

He entered the copse of elms and saw that the road passed out of sight over a hill in the distance. The countryside was a gently rolling green, dotted with trees and completely devoid of human artifacts. As he walked briskly along, drinking in huge gulps of the clean country air, he was pleasantly aware of an unusual lack of fatigue, a new spring to his step. He began to whistle a long-forgotten tune in time to his zestful pace.

Presently he found that the road ran alongside a clear, bubbling stream and still later made its way around a small lake bordered by towering cypresses. The sun, an hour past its zenith, beat down warmly upon his shoulders. The invitation of the cool water was not to be resisted.

As he began leisurely to undress, he noticed for the first time that he wore faded denim trousers and an equally faded chambray shirt with rolled-up sleeves. Tossing his clothes aside, he waded into the lake and paused in shock as he saw his reflection in the clear water. A quick self-examination revealed what he was surprised he had not noticed before. He had the firm, well-muscled body he remembered possessing as a young man.

As he paddled lazily in the cool water, he knew that this was no dream. But if not a dream . . . *what?* No questions, he told himself. Enjoy.

Leaving the lake, he threw himself down on the clean, grassy shore. Idly chewing a blade of grass, he gazed contentedly at the white clouds drifting across the sky. Through half-closed eyes he saw a swallow-tail butterfly flitting among the branches overhead. Somewhere near at hand, a meadow lark called to its mate. Then he slept.

He was awakened by the tickle of an ant on his bare stomach. He stood up, stretched, and pulled on his clothes.

As Sharpe began walking down the road once more, the sun was near the horizon. The clouds had taken on the royal hues of sunset, and he felt a slight twinge of anxiety. The air was growing chill, and now some primitive instinct urged him to seek shelter. Shivering, he rolled down his sleeves and assumed a faster gait.

The sun had dropped below the horizon, and the dull red sky was slowly fading to gray as he approached another group of trees overhanging the road.

He passed through the trees and stopped, surprised. The dusty road was now a highway, and he stood knee-deep in snow. Cars whizzed by, their headlights piercing the darkness as snowflakes wetly touched his face. As he stood shaking with cold, a pickup of ancient vintage rattled to a stop.

"Hey, there, young feller," the driver rasped hospitably. "If y'er goin' into the city, y'd better get in before you catch yer death of pneumonia."

Sharpe climbed in with heartfelt thanks. How would he explain his scant attire? But the garrulous old man did not ask. Sharpe absently acknowledged the driver's remarks from time to time as he concentrated on the enigma in which he found himself.

That was clearly the New York skyline some distance ahead, so how, back beyond the trees, could there be a place of summer? A place where the ugly church was a thing of weathered wood, not patterns of colored oil. A place where he was young? But he was still young. He felt it, then studied himself and knew it.

Hours later he arrived at the apartment where he had lived for two decades. He looked up and saw that a light was on. He felt a stab of fear. What would he find in that apartment?

He pushed through the reveling crush of people -- yes, it was somehow still New Year's Eve -- and caught the entrance door to the apartment building as a laughing couple emerged. He ascended the stairs as his heartbeat quickened with dread.

He stood for a moment on the fifth-floor landing and glanced about the familiar surroundings. He took a deep breath and approached the door of his apartment. He fumbled in his pockets, knowing he would find no key, then lifted his fist and knocked sharply on the aging wood.

Inside the apartment, no sound of movement. He knocked again, waited, then slowly turned the doorknob. The door swung open. Damn! He had forgotten again to lock it. But as he stood in the doorway, he forgot the lock as he reeled with the shock of what he saw.

There, sitting in the overstuffed easy chair and staring at the painting was -- *himself!* Swaying with the impact of the scene, he clutched the door and stared. Overwhelming hatred welled up within him. Hatred for the withered old body sitting there. Fear, too. Fear that the old Sharpe would return to consciousness and this fine, young body would be gone forever. But, he thought with desperate craftiness, if the old man did not regain his senses . . .

He quietly closed the door, slipped home the heavy bolt, and moved silently across the worn carpet. He grasped the gold loving cup, lifted it high above the old man's head . . .

. . . and slowly set it down in its accustomed place.

*I am not a murderer*, he thought. He shook the old man's shoulder . . .

. . . until he came out of his trance and looked up into his own face, now smooth and handsome, and into his own eyes, now sparkling with the vigor of youth . . .

. . . and looked down into his own wrinkled face, into his own eyes, the light of vitality dimmed and the corneas yellowed with age.



One mind in two bodies, each his own and yet not his own.

"What am I to do?" the young Jerry Sharpe said.

Old Jeremiah Sharpe sighed. "Do what you must."

"But I might die, too," young Jerry protested.

Old Jeremiah laughed harshly and tapped himself on the chest. "You call this living?" He painfully raised himself from the chair and thrust the loving cup into the young man's hands, into *his own* strong, young hands. He lifted his eyes to the painting. "Do it!"

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The police, when days later they were finally summoned by an uneasy landlady, broke down the door and retched at the odor of decaying flesh.

The homicide team was baffled. The door was bolted from the inside, and the windows had been locked so long that the fasteners had rusted together.

"How could he have done it?" one officer said.

"He couldn't have," the other replied, "but he *must* have!"

The coroner was adamant. "Look at the back of his skull," he told Inspector Thomas. "Even a strong, young man could not have done that to himself. Facts are facts, Inspector."

"The room was sealed," the Inspector retorted. "I don't give a damn about your facts. *Sharpe killed himself!*"

The coroner prevailed. The result of the inquest, decided by a coroner's jury, was "death at the hands of person or persons unknown."

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Young Jerry Sharpe stared at the ugly church in the glare of the summer sun. He studied the stand of elms, kicked his toe into the dust of the road, and turned to look in the other direction. A road has two ends, he thought, or perhaps two beginnings.

He sensed the presence of the church behind him (was it a church?), but he did not look back to confront the unsightly edifice. Instead, he smiled and gazed into the far distance where the dusty road gradually narrowed to a point.

He hummed a few bars of that still-forgotten tune and found that he could remember its name. Straightening his strong, young shoulders, he began to walk.

After a while he stopped, and for the first time he felt afraid. *Am I dead?* he thought. *Is this Heaven? Surely it can't be Hell.*

But perhaps it is, he thought. An endless loop in which I kill the older "me" over and over for eternity. *That would be hell! Or Hell.*

He continued to walk, but somehow he no longer found joy in his new-found youth. All he could think about was his wasted life. He could have done so much, but he had not. He had drifted along, never coming close to his youthful dreams.

He looked up and saw that the sun had passed its zenith. He looked ahead along the dusty road that seemed to disappear into infinity. *I've got to get out of this,* he thought.

He saw the trees through which he had earlier passed to find the highway. *Do I dare?* Would he just find the highway again, return to the apartment, find himself waiting inside?

Perhaps it was nothing more than a matter of will. Last time, he had simply wanted to go home. What about now? No big mystery about that, he thought. He wanted a second chance. Impossible, of course; but then, none of this was possible anyway.

He took a deep breath and walked through the trees, fully expecting to find himself in winter with a highway just beyond the trees.

No. The air still held the warmth of summer. He felt a curious sense of *déjà vu*. He knew this place!

He heard the distant strains of a Sousa march and saw the clump of buildings in the distance. He knew exactly where he was! He began to hurry along, knowing what he would find at Bratton High School.

In a little while he had reached the grandstand. A speaker's platform had been set up at the 50-yard line. On the platform were four or five people of importance -- and an eighteen-year-old boy who grinned as he accepted a gold loving cup.

In the next instant he was there on the platform, and the trophy was in his hands. He was only faintly aware of the cheering crowd. He was too busy trying to accept that he was eighteen again -- but with all the memories of the next half century!

He looked up and saw a large, fluffy cloud that somehow formed itself into a face. No, two faces, each looking in the opposite direction.

One of the faces seemed to smile . . . and Janus winked.

